



TALES OF LONG AGO

WHEN THE WORLD WAS YOUNG



HURON AND IROQUOIS

The creation myth of the Hurons and the Iroquois

This creation myth was related in 1874, north of Lake Erie, by a Huron sub-chief who was then about seventy-five years of age. It is probably the oldest detailed recording of the origin myth that was once related, with some variations in minor details, by the Hurons and by the Six Nations of the Iroquois. As the old storyteller "had heard the myth in his youth from the elders of his people, their joint recollections would carry it back to the middle of the [eighteenth] century, when the customs and traditions of the Wendat were retained in their full vigour."

The tribe that called themselves "Wendat" were nicknamed "Hurons" by the French; their name was corrupted to "Wyandot" by the British.

Among the Hurons, the twin brothers in the story were called Tijuskeha, meaning "Good Man," and Tawiskrong, meaning "like flint." Among the Iroquois nations, the evil brother was named Tawiskarow; the good brother, Teharonhiawagon, meaning "the Master of Life." In Sketches of Ancient History of the Six Nations written by a Tuscarora (David Cusick) the two brothers are called the "Good Mind" and the "Bad Mind."

In the beginning, there was nothing but water—nothing but a wide, wide sea. The only people in the world were the animals that live in and on water.

Then down from the sky world a woman fell, a divine person. Two loons flying over the water happened to look up and see her falling. Quickly they placed themselves beneath her and joined their bodies to make a cushion for her to rest upon. Thus they saved her from drowning.

While they held her, they cried with a loud voice to the other animals, asking their help. Now the cry of the loon can be heard at a great distance over water, and so the other creatures gathered quickly.

As soon as Great Turtle learned the reason for the call, he stepped forth from the council.

"Give her to me," he said to the loons. "Put her on my back. My back is broad."

And so the loons were relieved of their burden. Then the council, discussing what they should do to save the life of the woman, decided that she must have earth to live on. So Great Turtle sent the creatures, one by one, to dive to the bottom of the sea and bring up some earth. Beaver, Muskrat, Diver, and others made the attempt. Some remained below so long that when they rose they were dead. Great Turtle looked at the mouth of each one, but could find no trace of earth. At last Toad dived. After a long time he arose, almost dead from weariness. Searching Toad's mouth, Great Turtle found some earth. This he gave to the woman.

She took the earth and placed it carefully around the edge of Great Turtle's shell. There it became the beginning of dry land. On all sides, the land grew larger and larger, until at last it formed a great country, one where trees and other plants could live and grow. All this country was borne on the back of Great Turtle, and it is yet today. Great Turtle still bears the earth on his back.

After a while, the woman gave birth to twins, who had very different dispositions. Even before they were born, they struggled and disputed. The mother heard one of them say that he was willing to be born in the usual manner; the other angrily refused to be born in that way. So he broke through his mother's side and killed her.

She was buried in the earth, and from her body grew the plants that the new earth needed for the people who were to be created. From her head grew the pumpkin vine, from her breasts the corn, and from her limbs the bean.

The twins were not men, but supernatural beings; they were to prepare the new earth to be the home of man. As they grew up, they showed their different dispositions in everything they did. Finding that they could not live together, each went his own way and took his portion of the earth. Their first act was to create animals of different kinds.

Evil Brother, whose name means "flint-like," created fierce and monstrous animals, to terrify and destroy mankind. He created serpents, panthers, wolves, bears—all of enormous size—and huge mosquitoes that were as large as turkeys. And he made an immense toad that drank up all the fresh water that was on the earth.

Good Brother, at the same time, was creating the harmless and useful animals—the dog, the deer, the elk, the buffalo, and many birds. Among them was the partridge. To the surprise of Good Brother, Partridge rose in the air and flew toward the country of Evil Brother.

"Where are you going?" asked Good Brother.

"I am going to look for water," answered Partridge. "There is none here, and I have heard that there is some in the land of Flint."

Good Brother followed Partridge, and soon he reached the land of Evil Brother. There he was met by the giant snakes, the fierce beasts, and the enormous insects his brother had created. Good Brother overcame them. He could not destroy them, but he made them smaller and less fierce, so that human beings would be able to master them.

Then Good Brother came to the giant toad. He cut open the toad

and let the water flow forth into the land. Thus rivers were formed. Good Brother wanted each stream to have a two-fold current, so that one side of the river would flow in one direction and the other side in the opposite direction.

"In this way, people can always float downstream," he explained.

"That would not be good for the people," said Evil Brother. "They should have to work one way."

So he made the rivers flow downstream only. And to make paddling a canoe harder and more dangerous, he created rapids and waterfalls and whirlpools in the rivers.

In a dream, Good Brother was warned by the spirit of his mother to be careful, lest Evil Brother destroy him by treachery. When the twin brothers saw that they would always disagree, they decided to have a duel. The one who was victorious would be the master of the world. They decided also that each of them should tell the other what weapon could destroy him.

"I can be destroyed," said Good Brother, "only if I am beaten to death by a bag full of corn or beans."

"I can be destroyed," said Evil Brother, "only if I am beaten to death with the antler of a deer or the horn of some other animal."

They set off a fighting ground, and Evil Brother started the combat. He struck his brother with a bag of corn or beans, chased him over the fighting ground, and pounded him until he was nearly lifeless. His mother's spirit revived him and he recovered his strength.

Then Good Brother seized a deer's antler, pursued his brother, and beat him until he killed the evil one.

After his death, Evil Brother appeared to his brother and said, "I am going to the far west. Hereafter, all men will go to the west after death."

And so until the Christian missionaries came to our land, the spirits of dead Indians went to the far west and lived there.

The Tuscaroras, one of the six tribes in "The Iroquois League of Nations" (see p. 142), had an interesting addition to this creation myth of the Iroquois-speaking people. The Tuscaroras were living along the Roanoke River in North Carolina, in southeastern United States, when the first white colonists came to that region. After the American Revolution, the members of the tribe and of the other Iroquoian tribes that had sided with Great Britain against the colonies were given a reserve along the Grand River, in Ontario. In another of the traditions of the Tuscaroras, their ancestors had lived, centuries earlier, along the St. Lawrence River, which they called Kanawage.

Ages after the creation of the world, the plants, and the animals, Sky Holder decided to create people to live on the earth and enjoy the things he had created. The people would be stronger, braver, and more beautiful than anything he had created earlier. So from the heart of the Great Island, where they had been subsisting on moles, Sky Holder brought out six pairs. They were to become the ancestors of the greatest of all people.

The first pair were left beside a large river; their children and grandchildren became known as the Mohawk people. The second pair were told to make their home beside a large stone; their descendants became the Oneidas. The word *Oneida* means "upright stone." The third pair were left to make their home on a high hill or mountain called *Onondaga*; their descendants are known as the Onondagas.

The fourth pair were told to make their home near a long lake that has a mountain rising from the water. Their family's Indian name means "a great pipe." They have long been known as the Cayugas. The fifth pair were directed to live near a knoll south of another lake. Their Indian name means "possessing a door." They have long been known as the Senecas.

The sixth pair, the ones who became the ancestors of the Tuscaroras, were led by Sky Holder to a land farther south, toward the noon-day sun, until they reached the bank of the great water and the mouth of a river. That river is now called the Roanoke. They were directed to make their home along its banks. Sky Holder stayed with them a while and taught them to make and to use the bow and arrow. He taught them other useful crafts and arts. That is why the Tuscaroras know that they are the people preferred by Sky Holder.

The Onondagas, however, believe that they are the chosen people because they have been honoured by possessing the council fire. Each of the other four nations—the Mohawk, the Oneida, the Cayuga, and the Seneca—has some reason for believing it to be the nation preferred by Sky Holder.

When the six pairs were living in the heart of the Great Island, all spoke the same language. After they were separated and made their homes in different places, each nation altered the Iroquois language somewhat. But the changes were not great enough to make any of them lose the understanding of what the others said.

Years later, when the descendants of the six pairs became scattered, some families lived in areas where the bear was the principal game; so they were called the Bear clan. Others lived where beavers were trapped; so they were called the Beaver clan. The Deer, Wolf, Tortoise, and Eel clans received their names for similar reasons. The Turtle clan had a more complex history: during a very hot summer the pool in which the mud turtles lived became dry. So they started out to look for a new house. One of them, a particularly fat one, suffered a good deal from the exercise he was not used to. Finally, for comfort in walking he threw off his shell. He continued to change his appearance until, in a short time, this fat and lazy turtle became a man, the ancestor of the Turtle clan.